

## Civil War Book Review

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### Conflicting Memories on the "River of Death": The Chickamauga Battlefield and the Spanish-American War, 1863-1933

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## Review

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**Keefer, Bradley** *Conflicting Memories on the "River of Death": The Chickamauga Battlefield and the Spanish-American War, 1863-1933*. Kent State University Press, \$65.00 ISBN 978-1-60635-126-0

### Battles for Remembrance of Lives Lost

I have visited the Chickamauga National Military Park many times and my wife enjoyed childhood family outings there, but neither of us two historians had ever heard of the battlefield's role in the Spanish-American War. One of this book's main accomplishments is to uncover the layers of memory embedded on the site, and to place them in the broader conversation about war and remembrance. Bradley S. Keefer, Assistant Professor of History at Kent State University-Ashtabula, has written an important and informative book about the forgotten history of this important site.

The complex topic Keefer addresses is encapsulated in his first sentence: "This is a book about a battle, three armies, two wars, and one battlefield" (1). It focuses on the Chickamauga battlefield, the Confederate and Union armies that fought there in 1863—as well as the United States troops training there in 1898, and the competition between Civil War and Spanish-American War veterans for control of the site's official memory. Whether the battlefield was to be a preserved landscape, an instructional site for the nation's military, a memorial to fallen soldiers, or a site of national reconciliation is the central tension in this carefully researched and well-written book.

Keefer begins by retelling the well-known progress of the battle on September 19-20, 1863 in sufficient detail to please any Civil War history buff without digressing from his main point, which is the memories of the battlefield. The men who fought at Chickamauga, especially the Army of the Cumberland, played a pivotal role in preserving the historic site and constructing its memory. Slightings against the reputation of their general, George H. Thomas, prompted Ohio veteran H.V. Boynton to begin rehabilitating the reputation of his

commander, as well as western armies as a whole. Indeed, Boynton would become the leading advocate for commemorating the battle and the most effective Commissioner of the subsequent park. Confederate veterans protected their own legacy as well, arguing that Braxton Bragg not receive all of the blame for the Southern loss of Chattanooga. By the 1880s both sides agreed on the need for reconciliation, and the 1895 dedication of the National Military Park celebrated the valor of common soldiers and the sacrifices they made in battle, with little attention paid to the war's causes or consequences. Some of the park's key proponents included Union veterans who now served as pillars of the Chattanooga business community.

Shortly after that glorious reunion, American soldiers returned to Chickamauga once again, this time to train for a new war, now against Spain. Regular army soldiers and then volunteer regiments from both Northern and Southern states came to Camp George H. Thomas, named in an obvious attempt to connect the new war with the glories of the past. Continuity between generations and the prospect of achieving glory on the battlefield gave way to the more mundane realities of army life—the boredom of drill and the danger of diseases brought on by close quarters and inadequate sanitation. A typhoid epidemic devastated the assembled soldiers during the summer and fall of 1898. Keefer provides detailed charts of the various corps and their casualty rates, a valuable piece of scholarship (Appendix B, pp. 295-299). The soldiers' deaths became a vehicle for arguing over the war's merits, the social evils of alcohol, and the army's (and therefore incumbent government's) ineptitude. As Keefer points out, battlefields can be put to many uses after the fighting has ceased.

The competition for memory became even more intense after 1898, as Spanish-American War veterans wanted their own experience on the Chickamauga battlefield, where they too faced death, remembered. But Boynton and Civil War veterans insisted that the memorial landscape they had so carefully crafted remain intact, and that it predominate. Eventually the remnants of Camp Thomas disappeared and only a small memorial circle at the park's entrance recalled the tens of thousands of men who had bivouacked on the grounds at century's end. Those memorials are not in evidence today. The U.S. Army constructed Fort Oglethorpe just outside the park's northern boundary, thus providing a continued military presence and a justification for the park's original intent, use as a military training ground. Newly enlisted soldiers returned during the two World Wars, but the military turned over management of Chickamauga to the Department of the Interior. Today monuments to Civil War

generals and regiments dominate the landscape, rendering in stone the official memory of military valor and sacrifice.

Keefer tells us a fascinating story about the diverse and contested history of this major American battlefield. His research is impressive and his mastery of detail from multiple wars and commemorative efforts deserves praise. Bodnar's theoretical contrast between official and vernacular memory is effectively engaged and reinforced. Keefer might have pushed our theoretical understanding of the construction of memory further, especially considering the many layers of history he had to work with. But that is a slight quibble about a worthwhile book that teaches us much about how our nation remembers its wars and the men who fought them. *Conflicting Memories on the "River of Death"* offers a definitive study of Chickamauga's many memories.

*Thomas A. Chambers is Professor of History at Niagara University in western New York. His most recent book is Memories of War: Visiting Battlegrounds and Bonefields in the Early American Republic (Cornell University Press, 2012).*